

## Second Judicial District Court has 2020's Pro Bono Committee of The Year

The Second Judicial District Court's Pro Bono Committee was deemed "Pro Bono Committee of the Year" for 2020 by the Volunteer Attorney Program of New Mexico Legal Aid.

This designation recognizes the committee's efforts at finding ways to continue providing legal services to people in dire economic straits despite the restrictions on in-person contact mandated by the global pandemic.

The SJDC Pro Bono Committee recruits attorney volunteers to staff monthly clinics where members of the public get free advice on family and civil legal issues. The committee also hosts special legal fairs such as REAL ID Fairs and Law-La-Palooza events where attorneys go to community centers to meet with the public and answer questions about their legal issues.

As it became clear that the public health emergency would not allow such events to take place for the foreseeable future, the committee turned to technology to continue serving the public.



**The Pro Bono Committee of the Year found new ways to provide legal services during the pandemic.**

The committee's Co-Chairs, Judges Jane Levy and Erin O'Connell, accepted the award at the Volunteer Attorney Program's virtual awards ceremony on October 30, 2020.

"This committee has remained active and engaged," Melanie Fritzsche, program director for the Volunteer Attorney program, said in presenting the award. "Legal clinics are now provided regularly through tele-clinics. Projects of pro se videos are in production. We thank you all for your dedication to providing pro bono services."

Aja Brooks, director of the SJDC Center for Self-Help and Dispute Resolution, and a member of the Pro Bono Committee, gave the keynote address at the awards ceremony. She outlined how and why the committee took the actions that led to it being named Committee of the Year.

"People who pro bono work is geared toward have been hit hardest by the pandemic," she said. "As a result of businesses closing, unemployment skyrocketed. People began having trouble making ends meet, which resulted in problems paying rent, mortgages and debt. Something had to be done."

The committee confronted the challenges directly and began looking for ways to provide services virtually while also recognizing that many

people seeking these services would have trouble accessing technology.

"We were forced to think about the digital divide," Brooks said. "This was the time for ingenuity and innovation — to change what had been the status quo."

The committee converted its monthly legal clinics to tele-clinics, allowing people to attend either by video or telephone connections. The SJDC Self-Help Center started working with people via telephone and email. The committee recruited volunteer attorneys to make videos to give pro se parties information on various areas of law, and legal service organizations began offering instructional classes over social media platforms like Facebook. "We did podcasts and webinars," Brooks said. "We certainly adapted to the new circumstances created by the pandemic."

She also thanked all of the volunteer attorneys who worked to make these new services available to the public. "This proves that we are adaptable, and that even during a crisis we just want to help each other, which is necessary now more than ever."

In closing, Brooks expressed confidence that many of these new delivery platforms will remain in place when the pandemic dissipates, offering an improved landscape of services for pro se parties. "We have learned to survive and continue providing essential legal services to the public during a pandemic," she said. "I hope we retain most of what we have learned for the future. Let's keep doing what needs to be done to help others."